

# Veteran Updates

News and updates on Veterans issues from the San Francisco VA Health Care System • January 2018

## VA Wellness and Recovery Incorporating Outdoor Recreation Program

The San Francisco VA Health Care System's Wellness and Recovery Incorporating Outdoor Recreation (W.A.R.I.O.R.) program closed out the year with a trip to Muir Woods National Park. Thirty-five Veterans loaded up two buses and took a 30-minute ride from San Francisco VA Medical Center to Muir Woods National Monument, where they were greeted by Park Ranger, Jasmine with a tour and breathtaking vistas. The VA W.A.R.I.O.R. Program was developed through partnerships with the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, the San Francisco Parks Conservancy and SFVAHCS Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Center to provide an excellent opportunity for Veterans and a family member or a friend to enjoy guided national park tours. The W.A.R.I.O.R. Program aims to improve Veterans' mental health and wellness, increasing access to parks, and assisting Veterans to reintegrate into their communities, starting with park visits and progressing to volunteering and vocational opportunities. "The W.A.R.I.O.R. program has helped



Veterans arrive at Muir Woods National Monument.



Park Ranger, Jasmine providing Veterans with a guided tour of Muir Woods National Park.

me focus on my road to recovery, providing me with alternatives and a support system while connecting me with following Veterans. I don't feel alone," said one Veteran from the Drug Alcohol Treatment program.

When we think of National Parks or any parks, the first thing most of us think about is the physical health benefits. But what about the mental and social aspects? We have all experienced some stress or anxiety throughout our lifetime. Maybe you're finding yourself less socially engaged with your community. That's where the VA W.A.R.I.O.R. program can help. VA W.A.R.I.O.R. is open to Veterans of all generations and often attended by a wide variety of Veterans from the Vietnam era to the OIF/OEF generation.

The VA W.A.R.I.O.R. program meets on the first Friday of each month and provides free transportation to and from the park. Mark Smith, SFVAHCS OTR/L program coordinator explains,

"By being out in our parks, it helps to restore attention and mental well-being while connecting our Veterans with their community." Mark's vision of the W.A.R.I.O.R. program is connecting Veterans to places they may not have thought about going because of possible fears, anxiety, or maybe they just don't know about these opportunities. Jimmy, a U.S. Navy Veteran, enjoys the outdoors and finds it challenging being in a wheelchair to enjoy some of these parks because of all the planning that goes into traveling on public transit. VA W.A.R.I.O.R. has helped to bridge that gap and lessen the challenge.

**“By being out in our parks, it helps to restore attention and mental well-being while connecting our Veterans with their community.”**

— Mark Smith

"I've enjoyed everything about VA W.A.R.I.O.R. program. I would like to see more Veterans take advantage of this," said Jimmy. Muir Woods was Richard's third outing with the VA W.A.R.I.O.R. Program. "I never thought I would catch crabs at the VA," said Veteran Richard while reflecting on his first outing with the VA W.A.R.I.O.R. Program to Fort Point earlier this year.

For more information and to attend the next VA W.A.R.I.O.R. monthly park experience, please contact Mark Smith, program coordinator at 415-609-7986.

# Women Veterans Health Care



## Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the state of moment-to-moment awareness of one's experience without judgment. It is human nature to sometimes live on autopilot. We have tendencies to rehearse the future — what will I do next? Or rehash the past — I shouldn't have done that.

Being mindful is noticing what is happening right now; without judging or trying to fix it. Being mindful and aware allows you to tune into signs and signals that your body and mind is sending.

Benefits of practicing mindfulness include reduced rumination, stress reduction, boosts to working memory, less emotional reactivity, increased cognitive flexibility, and relationship satisfaction. When we are present, we can make conscious, proactive choices about every aspect of our health.

Formally practicing mindfulness includes activities that allow you to dedicate time to meditate and be in the present moment; and informally—simply paying attention to what you are already doing, such as drinking a cup of coffee or petting the dog. Try a few of these simple steps to begin your mindfulness journey and remember that presence takes practice!

## Practice mindfulness by maintaining the following activities:

- Find a time during the day to sit quietly for 5 to 10 minutes, listen to your breath, and be in the moment. You may need to try meditating at different times of the day to see what works for you. Maybe it's during your lunch break or first thing when you wake up.
- Repetition is very helpful in sticking to a mindfulness practice. Try combining meditation with another existing habit. For example, meditate right after brushing your teeth every morning. Meditating in the same time and place each day will help create a habit.

## Try these simple steps:

- Find a comfortable seated posture with both feet flat on the ground.
- Gently close your eyes, noticing the sensations in the body, the activity of the mind, and whatever emotions are present.
- Invite a sense of ease into the body.
- Gently turn your attention to your breath, perhaps noticing how the chest rises and falls with each breath.
- The mind will wander. When you notice, softly bring the attention back to the breath.
- Give yourself the space to be just as you are. The goal is paying attention with acceptance and kind curiosity.
- Start with just 5 minutes and increase time as it feels right.

